



Transportation Advisory Committee

Meeting held via conference call due to COVID

Minutes

Thursday, June 4, 2020

Lisa Sheppard called meeting to order at 2:02 p.m.

Meeting was held via teleconference call

Members Present: Carla Augustad, Hugh Austin, Randy Brodehl (Commissioner), Jenny Cloutier, Jessica Kramer, Marceen Liechti, Marcy Roberts, Robert Smith, Tagen Vine, Kevin Warrington, Kyle Waterman

Staff Present: Lisa Sheppard (Agency on Aging Director), Tom Schneider (Transportation Manager), Kristina Stone (Office Coordinator), Elizabeth Wood (Dispatcher)

Guests: No guests participated.

Call to Order: TAC Chair Chuck Wilhoit opened the meeting.

Public Comments: There was no public comment.

Chair Opening Remarks: Chuck thanked everyone for their willingness to participate in the meeting via teleconference.

Approval of Minutes: Minutes of the February 6, 2020 meeting were reviewed. Randy Brodehl moved to approve the minutes. Hugh Austin Seconded. All in favor. Motion Passed.

COVID-19

- ❖ Lisa thanked Tom for his quick response to COVID, getting information out to the riders and putting procedures in place to keep everyone safe.
- ❖ Tom reported on the measures taken since the beginning of the pandemic, the current status of routes/runs and the safety precautions and protocols that have been put in place.
 - In the early days we started looking at what transits were doing in areas first affected by the virus, particularly Seattle. As COVID began to spread across the country, we expanded our research to include other areas and to determine if it appeared the virus was spreading via public transportation.
 - We implemented new cleaning and sanitizing procedures to include wiping down buses between riders.
 - We attempted to obtain N95 masks through multiple sources, including the state and county, but were unsuccessful due to the national shortages. Senior volunteers provided some cloth masks and we ordered surgical masks, which finally arrived in the past week.

- We have been participating in national conference calls with the FTA to stay informed on the regulatory impact (and roll out of CARES Act funding) as well as the public transportation response across the country.
- Coincidentally, we were hit hard in the early stages of the pandemic with a driver shortage, most unrelated to COVID. We were down as many as 7 drivers for a period of time. Fortunately, it was during the shut-down when our city routes were suspended and overall ridership was very low, so it did not affect our service.
- During the shut-down, we had a very significant ridership decrease on both fixed routes and Dial-A-Ride (DAR) as there were few places people could go. In consultation with the Health Department, we decided to temporarily suspend the fixed routes in Kalispell, all but one day of fixed-deviated service in Columbia Falls and the Tri-City Commuter run. When the schools closed, we also suspended the SPARKS route for the remainder of the school year.
- Although we continued our Dial-A-Ride service so our most vulnerable citizens could still get to essential services, ridership continued to drop leveling out at about 20-25 rides per day for several weeks, which is a fraction of pre-COVID DAR ridership. We have begun to see a gradual increase in ridership as we've begun the phased re-opening.
- We have limited the number of riders on our DAR buses to no more than two at a time and will continue that practice as long as demand allows.
- We implemented Food Bank Runs as well as early morning shopping runs to help older adults and people with disabilities get to the designated senior shopping hours. We built fixed-deviated runs to transport the food bank volunteers to deliver food boxes to designated senior housing apartments. We phased out these runs by Memorial Day.
- About mid-May we implemented a mandatory mask policy for all drivers.
- Also in mid-May, we resumed fixed route service in Kalispell, allowing for 6 feet of space between driver and passengers and distancing between passengers with spaced seating on the buses. We also limited occupancy to a maximum of 10 riders on the city buses at one time.
- We are scheduled to resume Tri-City Commuter service on June 15th.

❖ Lisa updated everyone on ridership

- Ridership was extremely low during the shut-down as riders had very limited places to go and routine medical care was postponed, which accounts for a significant portion of our DAR rides.
- As we entered into the beginning phases of reopening we began to see an increase in ridership, particularly to medical facilities.
- We are challenged with figuring out how to provide service safely going forward and planning for a possible surge of COVID as everything re-opens or a recurrence in the fall and winter.
- Tom added that other transits across the country have transitioned to demand response only service. We are exploring the pros and cons of this approach for our area. Of particular concern is that funding is normally dependent in part on ridership, and it's likely that demand response will not produce the same volume of ridership as fixed route service. However, as states and transit systems adapt to COVID, it's possible the funding formula will change.
- Tom mentioned that our goal is to make riders and the employees feel safe and comfortable. We have begun installing plexiglass shields as a barrier between drivers and passengers. We will also offer masks to riders as needed.

❖ Lisa covered CARES Act funding

- The state of Montana received a significant amount of CARES Act funding for rural transit and has agreed to cover 100% of expenses for the last two quarters of FY 2020 and probably at least the first quarter of FY 2021, which begins July 1st.
- We are not collecting fares for either fixed or DAR until further notice to avoid potential exposure through money exchange or counting as also in consideration of financial hardship in our communities.
- TransADE funding, which is collected from rental car fees and used to support service for older adults and people with disabilities, will likely be heavily affected by COVID. Based on conversations with MDOT staff, we expect our FY 2021 funding to remain as allocated (\$172,307, about 18% of our total federal/state funding) as it is based on past year receipts, but we anticipate a possible 30% decrease in funding in FY 2022.
- Due to the CARES Act funding, we have been able to put some funds in reserves to use as we continue to respond to changing circumstances, including potential budget cuts.
- MDOT has also informed us they have set aside some CARES Act funds for capital projects. We are putting together a potential project list.
- MDOT recently offered to use CARES Act funds (no local match required) to purchase smaller capacity vans to add more flexibility to transit fleets. We requested and were approved for 3 of the vans, two of which are wheelchair accessible. We expect delivery shortly.

Transportation Manager Report- Tom Schneider

❖ Alternate fuels update

- We have been exploring both electric and propane options with both electric and propane and have visited with several consultants.
- Electric vehicles will likely be a viable option at some point in the future, but it appears propane is more feasible for us at this time due to more complicated logistics and higher costs associated with electric. Many transits use propane as a bridge to future incorporation of electric vehicles.
- We've compared the pros and cons of leasing vs. purchasing a tank. We would incur fewer upfront expenses with leasing but purchasing our own tank would result in greater annual savings, up to \$50,000 per year, which would in turn allow us to shift the funds we would have spent on fuel to cover other operational costs. There is a possibility we could use CARES Act funds to purchase the tank.
- There is a cost to convert existing buses to propane, between \$18,000 and \$25,000 per bus. We are in discussions with MDOT about funding options.
- Although an electric bus fleet is out of reach for now, we have begun conversations with Flathead Electric about the potential for collaborating on an electric van pool project.

❖ Rebranding

- We are moving forward with the Mountain Climber as our new brand. MDOT has agreed to cover the rebranding costs. We want the new brand to be focused on the rider experience and where they want to go.
- We are leaning heavily toward rebrand all vehicles, but are considering the possibility of reserving the Mountain Climber brand for commuters.
- We are in the process of getting bids from design companies to develop the new logo and bus wraps.
- To begin building the Mountain Climber infrastructure, we are considering experimenting with commuters this summer depending on how COVID progresses. Some options we are looking at and getting community feedback on include:

- Offering seasonal routes/destinations such as West Glacier, Polebridge, Hungry Horse Reservoir and Forest Service areas.
- Providing recreational routes from Kalispell to locations like Lone Pine State Park, various lakes, Wayfarers State Park, etc., given the guidance to enjoy the outdoors as a potentially safer option than indoor activities. We would pick up at senior housing complexes, but may make the route open to the general public as well.

❖ Discussion

• Rebranding

- Question: Jessica asked if regarding the rebranding there might be a possibility of the college students helping with the design and logo. She also mentioned a possible new logo contest. Answer: Tom mentioned that he thinks that is a great idea. It will depend on the timeframe we have to work within given CARES Act funding.
- Comment: Kyle said he thinks it is great that we are moving forward with rebranding and suggested we incorporate the vision of what we want the Mountain Climber to bring to our communities into the design and logo.
- Comment: Chuck suggested getting a press release to the Daily Interlake. Lisa mentioned the local media has been really good about spreading the word about our service changes and updates.
- Comment: Jenny states she likes the idea of a rider focused logo/brand.

• Masks

- Comment: Kyle stated has seen statistics showing wearing masks will reduce the spread of COVID by 95%. He suggested following emerging information closely and if this proves true, then possibly requiring riders to wear masks.
- Question: A member asked if the state pay for the masks if we offer them to the riders. Answer: Lisa stated that the MDOT is encouraging the use of masks and PPE is an allowable expense, however we were having difficulty getting masks even for employees.
- Comment: Randy recommended that before we make wearing of masks mandatory we should check with the Health Department. Jenny agreed stating she would hate to see us deny rides to passengers for not wearing a mask.
- Comment: Jessica mentioned the possibility of reusable masks available to riders that could be washed. Lisa stated we don't currently have the means to wash masks onsite but would look into options.

❖ MDT Compliance Review

- Tom reported MDOT is conducting a Compliance Review on Eagle Transit to ensure adherence to FTA and MDOT rules and regulations. This is a routine review that occurs every 3 years. It consists of a desk review, which is a self-report about 100 pages long, followed by an onsite visit by MDOT staff. Tom mentioned this is his first year completing the report.

The next meeting is August 6th. We will determine whether to meet in person or virtually when we get closer to the meeting date.

Meeting adjourned at 3:35